'The Interview': Ayana Elizabeth Johnson Has an Antidote to Our Climate Delusions

0:01

hey everybody it's Sabrina just popping

0:04

in here to remind you that every weekend

0:06

on Saturday we're going to be sending

0:07

you episodes of a new show our

0:09

colleagues are making the show is called

0:12

the

0:12

interview this week on the show David

0:15

maresi talks with scientist Ayanna

0:18

Elizabeth

0:19

Johnson okay here's the

0:25

show from the New York Times this is the

0:28

interview I'm David Mar

0:32

casy back in 2018 a big climate report

0:36

came out that really shook me it painted

0:38

a pretty dire picture of where we're

0:40

heading a climate that will likely warm

0:42

by at least 1 1/ 12° C by 2040 and it

0:45

was a grim warning of what things will

0:47

look like if we don't reverse course it

0:49

now seems probable that we're going to

0:51

blow past those climate targets and

0:53

that's led to a lot of climate fear

0:55

pessimism and activism rooted in anger

0:58

but recently there's been a growing

1:00

counter response to those darker

1:01

feelings including from some experts who

1:03

have a clear view on what's coming and

1:05

that response is aashi's

1:08

optimism though she doesn't go so far as

1:10

to call herself hopeful Dr Ayanna

1:12

Elizabeth Johnson is one of those

1:13

experts trying to change the mood on

1:15

climate she's a marine biologist the

1:18

co-founder of a think tank focused on

1:20

the future of coastal cities and she's

1:22

also worked on climate policy advising

1:24

lawmakers and working with the EPA on

1:26

climate Solutions and she's got a new

1:28

book that's due out this summer called

1:30

what if we get it right visions of

1:32

climate Futures that question what if we

1:35

get it right on climate is one I think

1:37

about a lot I'm skeptical but I wish I

1:40

weren't that's why I spoke with Johnson

1:42

to see if she can help me think and feel

1:44

differently here's our

1:48

[Music]

The Climate Crisis

1:53

conversation so I feel like over the

1:56

last decade or so the framing and disc

2:00

about the climate crisis a lot of it has

2:02

been rooted in feelings of fear and

2:06

anger and despair and I think more

2:12

recently there's been sort of a

2:13

concerted effort to make a kind of a

2:17

Vibe shift about how we talk about

2:21

climate you know one route and more

2:22

climate action needs way better Vibes it

2:24

needs better Vibes why do you think

2:27

there has been a a shift towards talking

2:31

about and thinking about solutions from

2:33

a place of like positive

The Shift Towards Solutions

2:36

possibility we've had at this point it's

2:39

been multiple Decades of it's happening

2:43

it's coming it's here it's bad oh it's

2:45

really bad okay uh we should do

2:48

something and of course all that is

2:50

factually accurate but the question is

2:53

like how do we convey that in a way that

2:57

brings people in and

3:00

projecting endless images of various

3:04

apocalyptic scenarios is not super

3:06

motivating right it kind of we went from

3:09

like okay climate change is this really

3:13

happening to like how serious is this to

3:16

oh God it's so bad let's just give

3:19

up and sort of skipped this middle step

3:23

of all hands on deck is it your sense or

Communicating Climate

3:26

do you know if there's data that's been

3:28

collected that like there are people who

3:31

want to be involved in climate but are

3:35

being sort of uh rendered Paralyzed by

3:38

fear or despair or that there are

3:39

disinterested people who you know are

3:42

just waiting to be motivated by kind of

3:43

a softer approach well first of all I

3:46

don't think there's any one way that we

3:47

should be communicating about climate

3:50

some people are very motivated by the

3:51

bad news they're like oh got to

3:53

avoid that like whoa that's terrifying

3:56

like what can I do to prevent the worst

3:58

case scenario so some people need that

4:01

jolt and that's what gets them going

4:03

some people are overwhelmed by that and

4:07

just don't know where to start I think

4:09

there's this false dichotomy between

4:13

hope and fear as if there's one is the

4:16

right way to communicate when in fact

4:18

there's like a full spectrum of emotions

4:20

that can be triggered by various things

4:22

that you receive about the world around

4:25

you about news about climate change and

4:28

all of that is useful

4:30

and so 62% of adults in the US say they

4:35

feel a personal sense of responsibility

4:37

to help reduce global warming but 51%

4:40

say they don't know where to start and

4:42

so to me the question is how do we

4:46

harness and support millions of people

4:50

in this country

4:51

alone who would like to be a part of the

How do we harness and support millions

4:54

solutions that's what we need is

4:58

to live in a world where people are

5:01

really focused on ensuring a livable

5:04

future on this planet that we have moved

5:08

Beyond sort of the platitudes of reduce

5:11

foruse recycle and people don't even

5:13

really pay attention to the first R

5:15

there the reduce people kind of

5:17

ignore but how can we

5:21

really create a culture

5:25

where everyone has a role to

5:28

play and

5:30

we have a choice of like what are we

5:33

going to do when faced with this problem

5:34

are we going to put our heads in the

5:36

sand or are we going to pitch in you

Sacrifice

5:41

know when you said the first R in reduce

5:43

reuse recycle is one that uh a lot of

5:45

people ignore um you know it makes me

5:49

think about an idea that I think is a

5:52

difficult one for for lack of a better

5:54

term the average person in in the global

5:56

North it's difficult for them to think

5:58

about and that's the idea of

6:00

sacrifice or sacrificing things that

6:02

they take for granted or Comforts just

6:04

less is more is it maybe a nicer way

6:07

to people don't like sacrifice people

6:10

don't like

6:11

bands but I think there's a way to frame

6:14

that as like this is an opportunity to

6:16

just like live a different and better

6:19

life so make the case for me that it's

6:22

better like do you think there is a a

6:24

possible climate future that doesn't

6:28

involve personal sacrifice

Consumerism

6:30

I mean I don't think consumerism is

6:33

really that satisfying for most people

6:36

we're sort of taught that we need to

6:38

keep up with these Trends and like buy

6:40

all this stuff but it doesn't really

6:41

make us

6:42

happy happiness levels are declining

6:45

people have fewer close friends like

6:47

it's not like the current status quo is

6:49

awesome and we should be fighting to

6:51

hold on to it right we just like have a

6:53

bunch of junk instead of being

6:56

surrounded by beautiful durable

7:01

repairable things that we love we've

7:04

just like got a bunch of single-use

7:06

plastic garbage and just having like

7:10

piles of garbage everywhere is not like

7:14

super delightful right like having all

7:16

this fossil fuel-based plastic on every

7:18

Beach and in our drinking water and in

7:20

our rain and in our beer and in our

7:22

Seafood which is currently the case it's

7:25

not like that's a life I want to hold on

7:28

to and so so often we think about the

7:32

changes that are needed we don't

7:35

actually look at both sides of the coin

7:38

we think about oh this is going to be

7:40

expensive or oh this is going to be

7:42

inconvenient without thinking about like

7:45

do you know how inconvenient and

7:47

expensive climate change is it is so

7:50

much

7:51

worse if you actually balance the cost

7:54

of addressing the climate crisis

7:56

starting now with the cost of not

7:59

addressing it I mean those are wildly

8:02

different orders of magnitude of

8:04

inconvenience and dollars you know just

Seafood

8:07

cuz you mentioned Seafood do uh you find

8:10

that people get anxious ordering Seafood

8:12

when you go out for dinner with them are

8:13

you I kind of wish they get more anxious

8:16

um no I'm I'm judging them out loud oh

8:20

what do you say well I will not let

8:22

anyone eat octopus in front of me that

8:25

is a hard line I mean they're so smart

8:27

they're so cool like why would you eat

8:29

them I sometimes say when people are

8:32

like do you want to go have sushi I'm

8:33

like do you really want to have sushi

8:34

with me and is it stupid for anybody to

8:37

be buying a beach home these days I mean

Denial

8:41

if you like to set money on fire it's a

8:42

great

8:44

plan I don't know I mean the the level

8:47

of denial of the changes that are coming

8:49

is really off the charts like and the

8:51

way people joke about it like go to The

8:54

Hamptons to a cocktail party and tell

8:56

someone that you're you work on climate

8:58

change and they'll be like so how soon

9:00

till I have beachfront property because

9:01

I'm like a few rows back right now just

9:04

like as if it's funny and we don't

9:06

actually have to prepare for things but

9:08

I get it like it's really hard to get

9:10

your head around the amount of change

Anger

9:12

that's coming does other people what you

9:14

see as other people's denial make you

9:18

angry anger is not really a Primary

9:21

Emotion for me yeah I mean I'm just a

9:25

regular human I experience the full

9:27

range of emotions certainly anger is one

9:29

of them but heartache is another I mean

9:33

if we think about just how much we're

9:36

losing that can be really hard

9:39

um yeah that can be really hard to deal

9:42

with and as a scientist I mean I look at

9:44

all these projections

9:46

and I could cry looking at a graph

9:49

because I know the amount of suffering

9:52

and ecological loss that these numbers

9:54

imply but honestly I I feel quite lucky

10:00

to have been born with a brain chemistry

10:03

that's not prone to depression because

10:05

given the amount of bad news I taken

10:07

every day that would be really hard to

Soft Climate Denial

10:10

deal with but there is kind of this

10:13

um soft denial of the climate crisis

10:17

that I think is extremely widespread

10:21

including for someone like myself where

10:23

oh describe your soft climate denial

10:26

well I I feel like I understand the

10:29

scope and honestly the horrifying scale

10:34

of our climate future

10:38

and if that's true

10:41

MH why don't I do more than compost I

10:46

don't know why well it's it's

10:49

um you know I'm supposed to be asking

10:51

you these questions be much more

10:53

informative for the audience actually

10:55

hearing what you cuz we're all in that

10:57

same boat like if this is true yes but

11:00

and this goes directly to the heart of

11:02

one of my first questions for you is

11:03

like what motivates behavior and I feel

11:06

like you know for me what small steps

11:10

I've taken in response to the climate

11:12

crisis have been directly the result of

11:18

uh feelings of anger and despair both my

11:20

own anger can be very motivating both my

11:23

own and you know over the last 10 years

11:25

there's been more anger and fury

11:30

about what's happening than ever before

11:32

and and that is directly coterminous

11:34

with the biggest changes we've seen in

11:38

terms of uh proclimate policy in terms

11:40

of uh uh sort of public awareness of the

11:42

problem politicians actually

11:44

acknowledging that this is a problem all

11:46

of this to me suggests that anger works

11:49

and then there's also you know and fear

11:51

too like uh it didn't get people to stop

11:52

smoking by saying think about how

11:54

healthy you'll be if you don't do it

11:56

they they got people to stop smoking by

11:58

saying this will really hurt you if you

12:00

continue to do it and and I my

12:02

inclination is to think that the same

12:04

logic applies in climate and this is all

12:06

sort of just uh tangential to the

12:08

question you just asked me which is why

12:10

don't I do more and

12:12

um you know I I I I think

12:16

I I think I honestly find it too big and

12:20

too heartbreaking and also I'm I'm I'm

12:23

basically comfortable you know I'm

12:25

basically

Shifting Lifestyles

12:26

comfortable I think a lot of us are

12:28

dealing with this cognitive dissonance

12:30

right between the lifestyles that we

12:32

have especially those of us who have

12:35

nice

12:36

Lifestyles and the knowledge that it's

12:40

probably

12:41

unsustainable and I think there are all

12:43

these structural things that are in the

12:47

way of us shifting our lifestyles you

12:50

cannot take a train instead of a plane

12:52

if that train doesn't

12:54

exist I feel like there's obviously an

12:57

enormous amount we can do as individual

12:59

ual but really the system around us is

13:02

not set up for success I mean this is

13:04

why I focus on policy and not shaming

13:06

individual people into like tiny actions

13:09

in their own lives although we really do

13:10

need to they do add up like we should

13:12

all do more and better but I think this

13:16

is the need and the opportunity this is

13:20

why it's so important to have things

13:22

like the almost $400 billion do in the

13:25

inflation reduction act that help to

13:29

seed this

13:30

transformation like how can people

13:34

afford to Electrify their homes we have

13:38

millions of buildings in this country

13:41

that need to be retrofit we need to take

13:43

out all these boilers we need to change

13:46

our HVAC systems we to put in heat pumps

13:48

induction stoves electric water

13:51

heaters solar panels green roofs right

13:54

like there are these like big and the

13:56

grid has to be transformed to grid has

13:58

to be transformed

13:59

these are not things individuals have

14:01

control over it's not that simple list

14:04

of you know vote donate spread the word

14:07

protest lower your carbon footprint like

14:10

that's not enough and the fact that I

14:14

know you went out of out of your way to

14:16

make sure to interview a climate person

14:18

in the first few episodes of this show

14:20

like that's something only you can do

14:23

right you know uh maybe I just have like

14:26

an uh uh an unexamined uh rage problem

14:30

or anger issue but you know it makes me

14:33

mad to hear if you want to be mad there

14:35

are actual fossil fuel and big EG and

14:39

advertising Executives and politicians

14:41

who are enabling all of this like there

14:42

are individual humans actually a quite

14:45

small group of them who are making these

14:48

decisions that are impacting life on

14:50

this planet for the 8 million or so

14:53

species that share it and like that

14:55

should make you mad because who are they

14:59

to decide the future of life on Earth

15:01

and to be so callous and so short-term

15:05

thinking and so quarterly earnings

15:08

profit

15:09

shareholder dividend

15:11

driven that they are

15:14

jeopardizing biodiversity and quality of

15:17

life for all of us but do you do you

Historical Models

15:20

have like are there historical models

15:24

where massive social change was rooted

15:29

in feelings of of joy and positivity and

15:33

not you know indignation moral outrage

15:38

conflict I don't think there's any

15:40

movement that's just based on one

15:43

emotion the ways we're experiencing the

15:47

horrors of environmental destruction are

15:50

motivating people to get in the streets

15:53

but it's also like we love

15:56

nature we love clean rivers

16:00

we love all of these things like the

16:04

curus of Aspen leaves why would you not

16:08

want to keep that around and it's just a

16:11

matter of like what do you do with those

Good Nature Words

16:14

feelings can you remind me what curus

16:16

means there's so many good nature words

16:19

it is the sound of leaves in the wind

16:21

tell me other good nature words

16:24

petor is the smell of the soil after it

16:27

first starts to rain oh that is a good

16:29

one I mean then there's like the Latin

16:32

names of Caribbean fish species like

16:34

lactor fish

16:35

tricker there so many good ones what's

16:38

the non-latin name of that fish species

16:40

that's a smooth trunk fish that's also a

16:43

great name also a good name yeah they're

16:45

hilarious but you know I I feel like I'm

16:48

being like a David Downer here but the

16:52

just to like respond to the idea of

16:55

sacrifice you know it's I I just saw a

16:57

study that if we follow the the most

17:01

plausible possible path to

17:03

decarbonization by 2050 if we get there

17:07

the amount of carbon emissions that are

17:09

already in the air will result in

17:13

something like 38 trillion dollars worth

17:15

of Damages every year like that's baked

17:19

in so what are we talking about really

17:22

when we're talking about possibilities

17:24

what is it that you don't want to give

17:27

up um

17:31

do you know you know what the thing I I

17:33

I don't want to give up is I don't want

17:35

to give up the range of possibilities

17:38

for my kids you know they're they're

17:40

they're seven and nine and I you know

17:42

these These are totally selfish things

17:44

to bring up but you know like I assume

17:46

you care about other people on the

17:48

planet besides your children but like my

17:51

wife you seem nice I I hope things work

17:54

out for you thank you so much I

17:56

appreciate that I just don't know how to

17:58

think about the future that's that's

17:59

like I'm I'm I'm talking with you today

18:01

and really like the fundamental thing is

18:03

like I'm trying to understand how to

18:04

think about the future and I I I don't

18:07

feel like I understand it what you

18:09

mentioned about wanting to secure a good

18:11

future for your children this is the

18:14

number one thing that drives people to

18:17

do something about climate change it

18:20

really does come down to love as an

18:23

enormously powerful

18:25

motivator I don't have children but if I

18:28

did I would want to be able to look them

18:30

in the eye and say I did everything I

18:32

could to secure your

God Children

18:34

future and I think most parents feel

18:36

that way I feel that way about my

18:38

godchildren for sure I feel that way

18:40

about children that I've barely know at

18:43

all and so I feel like whether it's fear

18:46

or anger or love anxiety like all of

18:51

those can lead to us further rolling up

18:55

our sleeves that's the influence ction

18:59

that needs to happen for everybody I

19:02

mean I guess perhaps it's worth

19:04

saying it's okay not to be

19:07

hopeful I feel like there's so much

19:10

emphasis in our society on being hopeful

19:14

as if that's the answer to unlocking

19:16

everything I'm not a hopeful person I'm

19:20

not an

19:21

optimist I see the data I see what's

19:25

coming but I also see the full range of

19:28

Poss possible Futures I feel

19:31

like there's so much that we could

19:36

create it's not going to be perfect but

19:40

yeah how can we each be a part of

19:43

getting it as right as

19:47

possible I think um what getting it

19:50

right could look like would be a good

19:53

thing for us to pick back up on when we

19:56

speak again next week yeah I left

20:01

up after the break my second call with

20:04

Dr Johnson I asked her more about

20:07

specific solutions to The Climate crisis

20:09

and what she thinks might stop us from

20:11

pursuing

20:12

them I think I don't engage as deeply as

20:15

I should with the political divisions in

20:19

America and around the world as being a

20:22

really really enormous barrier to

20:25

getting any of this done

20:29

[Music]

20:44

hello hey Ayanna how are you I'm good

20:47

this is the interview I'm David

20:50

maresi you know one of the things that

Getting it right on climate

20:53

you had said near the end of our first

20:56

conversation was the phrase that's the

20:59

title of your book what if we get it

21:00

right can you give specific examples of

21:04

what getting it right on climate looks

21:07

like what are things that are within our

21:09

grasp that that we can get right so many

21:12

things I mean we know how to transition

21:15

to renewable energy we know how to

21:18

insulate buildings we know how to put on

21:21

green roofs reflective roofs on

21:23

buildings we know how to improve public

21:25

transit we know how to shift our trans

21:28

portation towards electric we know how

21:31

to avoid food waste which is actually a

21:33

huge source of greenhouse gas emissions

21:34

as food is rotting and releasing methane

21:38

we know how to just reduce our

21:41

consumption there's a million things we

21:44

could do of course there's room for

21:46

Innovation but there's absolutely

21:48

nothing that we need to wait

Skepticism

21:51

for so I'm always very impressed when uh

21:56

people have what feels like very

21:59

reasonable plausible answers to these

22:02

big questions about uh life on Earth but

22:06

in your in your sort of a uh if you're

22:09

tossing and turning in your bed at night

22:12

what skepticism do you have about your

22:14

own ideas like what might you be wrong

22:17

about I think I tend

22:21

to I think I don't engage as deeply as I

22:25

should with the political divisions in

22:29

America and around the world as being a

22:32

really really enormous barrier to

22:35

getting any of this

22:36

done I'm not in the dark about it but

22:40

it's not something that infuses my daily

22:44

life and work and every time it hits me

22:48

I'm just like how can we get past this

22:51

like the question of this upcoming

22:54

election the stakes are so high and we

22:57

have so many people

23:00

who do not

23:03

appreciate the risks that we're facing

23:06

and so are not motivated to do much to

23:09

address them so unfortunately the

23:11

climate crisis is going to give us a lot

23:13

of tests for how we can collaborate

23:16

across various social divisions but a

23:20

lot of the solutions to climate change

23:22

people agree on even if they don't agree

23:24

on the problem people are very excited

23:26

about the new battery manufacturing

23:29

plants in like deeply RED parts of this

23:31

country because they're good jobs Texas

23:34

and Iowa have the most wind energy of

23:38

any place in the US because it's

23:40

profitable so the economics of the

23:43

transition to renewable energy and

23:46

implementing climate Solutions make a

23:48

lot of sense and so I we may have to

23:51

just skip

23:52

over some of these divisions and let

23:55

self-interest in various ways guide us

23:59

towards where we need to go even if we

24:01

don't all agree on exactly the Contour

24:06

of the

Selfishness

24:08

problem you know I I got to say that

24:10

there was a response that I gave to you

24:16

based on a question that you asked me in

24:19

our prior conversation that I've really

24:21

been thinking about since we spoke and I

24:23

I was talking about the context of um

24:26

the future and you know sacrifice or if

24:28

we we might have to sacrifice and you

24:30

would ask me what I was so afraid of

24:33

giving

24:33

up and and I I was really thinking about

24:37

that since we spoke and I concluded that

24:40

I think the answer that I gave you in

24:41

the moment was kind of cockamamy so I I

24:44

want to try and give you what I think is

24:46

a more truthful answer and the the real

24:50

answer to why I'm might be reluctant to

24:54

change behaviors or be scared of of the

24:56

future in some ways

24:59

maybe actually has more to do with some

25:02

selfishness that's good of you to admit

25:04

I think we all want to hold on to our

25:06

comfort well is there sort of an

25:09

antidote to that kind of thinking and

25:11

then also is it possible that like that

25:13

just is human nature I think the answer

25:16

is community we have to be

25:19

responsible to more than ourselves we

25:21

have to

25:22

feel an obligation to more than just our

25:26

children it can't just be a selfish

25:29

desire to hold on to what we currently

25:31

have which is even that illogical

25:34

because the world is going to change

25:35

around us and the things that we have we

25:37

won't be able to hold on to because we

25:39

can't actually control all of society

25:42

and live in a bubble and so you can

25:46

maybe rip really tightly onto your

25:49

Comforts in the short

25:51

term but the more we resist being part

25:54

of the collective

25:56

solution the less lik

25:58

that Collective solution is to happen I

26:01

mean in a sense you're echoing a bit of

26:06

this bunker mentality right where we

26:08

have these wealthy people who are buying

26:11

up land in New Zealand and wherever

26:15

else trying to just save

26:19

themselves and to me that seems like

26:21

such a sad way to see the world right

26:24

like do you want to live in a bunker for

26:26

a year eating canned w

26:28

like is that the life we want to build

26:31

or do we just all try to make sure we

26:35

have a world where there's enough for

26:37

everybody where no one takes too much

26:40

and we share what we have i' I'd rather

26:44

[Music]

26:47

share that's Ayan Elizabeth Johnson this

26:50

conversation was produced by Seth Kelly

26:52

it was edited by Annabelle bacon mixing

26:54

by aim Shapiro original music by Dan po

26:58

ow Elisha eup and Maran Lozano

27:01

photography by Philip Montgomery the

27:03

rest of the team is priia Matthew and

27:05

Wyatt orm our executive producers Alison

27:08

Benedict special thanks to Rory Walsh

27:10

renan burelli Nick Pitman Isaac Jones

27:13

Maddie masello Jake Silverstein Paula

27:15

Schuman and Sam dolnick if you like what

27:17

you're hearing follow or subscribe to

27:19

the interview wherever you get your

27:20

podcast and to read or listen to any of

27:22

our conversations you can always go to

27:24

NY times.com

27:27

thein next week on the interview my

27:29

co-host Lulu Garcia Naro speaks with

27:31

Netflix CEO Ted Sandos I don't agree

27:35

with the premise that quantity and

27:37

quality are somehow in conflict with

27:39

each other I think our content and our

27:41

movie programming has been great but

27:42

it's just not all for

27:44

you I'm David maresi and this is the

27:47

interview from The New York Times

27:53

[Music]